**Origins of Progressivism**

Bounded by the end of the nineteenth century and the American entry into World War I, the Progressive Era brought dramatic changes to the nation’s economic, political, and social sectors. Progressives included both men and women from various ethnic groups, classes, and occupations who challenged traditional attitudes about the American way of life.

The reformers fought to overcome inefficiencies in government, corrupt political machines, and the inadequate living conditions of the poor. They believed industrialization and urbanization produced an abundance of social problems, including city slums and worker mistreatment by callous corporations. Scores of progressive-minded associations formed throughout the United States to raise concern for the grim issues and to press business and government leaders to address the problems.

The roots of Progressivism date back to the mid to late 1800s, when angry farmers and small business owners formed the Grange and later the Populist Party to confront unfair practices of big business. Progressivism appealed to middle and lower-class Americans who felt helpless against industrial giants like Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, whose increasing power influenced politicians and the laws and regulations they sanctioned. Progressives believed that individuals were essentially kind and well intentioned by nature. The root of society’s evils, they preached, was located in the structure of its institutions. Once government and big business were reformed, leaders would be able to focus their efforts on protecting the weaker members of society, such as women, children, the sick, and the poor.

Progressive writers attacked the rich in a succession of books and articles that accused the “bloated trusts” of cultivating corruption and concealing wrongdoing. Henry Demarest Lloyd targeted the questionable conduct of Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company in his book *Wealth Against Commonwealth*, and in *How the Other Half Lives, New York Sun* reporter Jacob A. Riis documented the rampant disease, filth, and suffering found in New York slums.

After the turn of the century, exposing offensive and immoral behavior became big business. Many magazines, including *McClure’s, Cosmopolitan*, and *Collier’s*, instructed their reporters to aggressively uncover scandalous stories. Theodore Roosevelt branded the zealous journalists “muckrakers,” after the character in John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* who was so fixated on raking the muck at his feet that he failed to see the celestial crown. From that time on, the term muckraking became synonymous with mudslinging journalism.

Despite Roosevelt’s admonishment, muckrakers accepted the label as a badge of honor. Circulation for the ten-cent magazines soared. Investigative reporters blanketed the cities to discover the next shocking story. In 1902, New Yorker Lincoln Steffens penned a series of articles for *McClure’s* titled “The Shame of the Cities,” in which he uncovered a corrupt alliance between “respectable” businessman and city governments. Two years later, *McClure’s* featured a disturbing exposé of the Standard Oil Company, written by Ida Tarbell, the most prominent woman muckraker.

Social iniquities were also popular subjects for magazines to investigate. While slum conditions generally garnered the most attention, other topics included “white slave” trafficking, industrial accidents, child labor, and the subjugation of blacks. Muckrakers also targeted medicine dealers who advertised unproven claims for their products that often contained high quantities of alcohol and other habit forming drugs. In a 1903 *McClure’s* editorial, S.S. McClure explained that the investigative reports offered proof that a high percentage of American corporations, employees, and politicians were immoral. “There is no one left,” he wrote, “none but all of us.” The editorial sparked a wave of activity in progressive movements as thousands of readers joined the fight to end corruption and improve living and working conditions for Americans.

Some progressives promoted more radical views to initiate reformation and close the gap between the rich and the middle and lower classes. In 1905, labor leaders Eugene V. Debs, William “Big Bill” Haywood, and Mary Harris “Mother” Jones organized the Industrial Workers of the World. The union did not hide its anti-capitalistic views, as evidenced by the opening line of its constitution: “The working class and the employing class have nothing in common.”

Radical progressives borrowed “advanced” ideas from prominent European intellectuals, most notably from Sigmund Freud. Although they did not concern themselves with much of his analytical theories, they did pick up on his thoughts about slips of the tongue and sexuality, and promoted a revolution of morals. Radical progressives advocated trial marriages and easy divorces, and pushed for sex education programs and the distribution of information about birth control.

As radical progressives fought to change conservative America, a group of Protestant ministers organized the Social Gospel movement to instill religious ethics into the business world. Congregational minister Washington Gladden started a ministry for working-class neighborhoods and favored sanctions to improve workers’ rights. Walter Rauschenbusch, a Baptist minister, proclaimed that Christians should endorse social reform to end poverty and labor abuse.

According to the members of the Social Gospel movement, it was the government’s ethical responsibility to improve the living and working conditions in America. Many economists climbed aboard the religious bandwagon to call for state action to produce social progress. Economist Richard T. Ely declared that “industrialization has brought to the front a vast number of social problems whose solution is impossible without the united efforts of church, state, and science.”

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